

Midnight's Orphans, or the Postcolonial and the Vernacular

I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic.—But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value. I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanscrit works. I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.

—Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Minute on Indian Education” (1835)

In 1997, Salman Rushdie celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence from British rule by coediting *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing, 1947–1997* with Elizabeth West. In the introduction to the anthology, Rushdie claimed that the most interesting literature of post-Independence India was in English.¹ “The prose writing—both fiction and non-fiction—created in this period [the fifty years after Independence] by Indian writers working in English,” he wrote, “is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the eighteen ‘recognized’ languages of India, the so-called ‘vernacular languages,’ during the same time; and, indeed, this new, and still burgeoning, ‘Indo-Anglian’ literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books. The true Indian literature of the first postcolonial half-century has been made in the language the British left behind”

(1997c, 50). It is readily apparent from Rushdie's introduction to the anthology that there are, in substance, two evaluatory parts to his argument regarding contemporary Indian literature. One is Rushdie's high estimation of Indian literature in English, expanded on in an interview given around the time of the anthology's publication in which he claimed that because of literature written in English, "India has finally managed to break through into world literature, into the world's language, and to create this great province inside it" (1997b, 36). There can be little quarrel with the general thrust of this part of Rushdie's argument—that the contributions of Indian writers working in English (not the least of which are some of Rushdie's own works) have been of great value. It is the other part—Rushdie's devaluation of literature written in other Indian languages—that has proven controversial and has met with criticism from various quarters.²

There is indeed much to be said in defense of the aesthetic value of literature written in Indian languages other than English. However, I am interested less in asserting this value *contra* Rushdie than in tracking what I consider certain other symptomatic *theoretical* and *critical* emphases of Rushdie's argument. For though I begin with Rushdie's provocative comments on contemporary Indian literature (and along the way will offer an assessment of some aspects of this literature), I intend finally to advance an argument about postcolonialism as a theoretical and literary critical project within the North American academy—that is, about what Hosam Aboul-Ela has felicitously christened "institutional postcolonial theory" (2007, 13).³ Rushdie is not in fact generally regarded as a critic or a theorist. Nevertheless, there is a certain justice in beginning with him. Commenting on Rushdie's "particular prominence," M. Keith Booker notes in the introduction to a recent anthology of critical essays on Rushdie that his work "has been particularly attractive" to postcolonial critics "for whom cultural hybridity is a crucial critical category" (1999, 2–3). Homi Bhabha, whose work I will discuss later in this chapter, is one such critic identified by Booker.

There is a congruence, then, between Rushdie's fiction and certain strands of commentary on postcolonial literature—a congruence that is instructive in a discussion of postcolonial criticism and theory. Critical overviews of postcolonialism have noted the great influence of these strands. Ania Loomba, for example, writes in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, "Postcolonial studies have been preoccupied with issues of hybridity, creolisation, mestizaje, in-betweenness, diasporas

and liminality, with the mobility and cross-overs of ideas and identities generated by colonialism” (1998, 173). And Leela Gandhi echoes this description when she writes toward the end of *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, “Postcolonial literary theory, as we have seen, tends to privilege ‘appropriation’ over ‘abrogation’ and multicultural ‘syncretism’ over cultural ‘essentialism’” (1998, 153). In this critical context, my turn to Rushdie allows me to demonstrate the widespread nature of the attitudes represented by these emphases and to show that the argument that follows is not relevant only to the domain of criticism and theory narrowly understood as a species of *academic* knowledge.

Of course, I should also note that the tendencies in postcolonial criticism and theory being identified here exist in dialogue and in contestation with other tendencies, especially the materialist criticism of such scholars as Aijaz Ahmad, Timothy Brennan, Barbara Harlow, Neil Lazarus, Satya Mohanty, Benita Parry, Edward Said, E. San Juan, and Gayatri Spivak.⁴ Echoes of my argument can be found in their work, and I will have occasion to draw on their enabling and suggestive commentary. At the same time, I am aware there are differences among these critics—and, indeed, between some of their critical perspectives and my argument. In identifying such a broad interpretive stance as materialist criticism, it is useless to look for consensus, even as there is value in recognizing and learning from congruities in critical aims, interpretive methods, and textual archives. I am guided here by Raymond Williams’s rejection of a dogmatic specification in advance of materialism’s content in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, where he notes “the necessary social processes through which the materialist enterprise defines and redefines its procedures, its findings and its concepts, and in the course of this moves beyond one after another ‘materialism’” (1980, 122). Williams by and large approves this self-correcting advancement, and I believe materialist criticism in the current moment of lull—for so it seems to me—between the theoretical flurry of the seventies, eighties, and nineties and what is to come is best served by a similarly catholic approach. In intervening in postcolonial studies here, then, I aim to strike a balance between a careful endorsement of materialist method on the one hand and a deliberately commodious understanding of materialism on the other.

This chapter begins with readings of three works of contemporary Tamil literature: K. N. Subramanyam’s poem “Situation” (an example of the formal and thematic experimentation of the New Poetry movement), Komal Swaminathan’s full-length socialist realist (though this

characterization is in some ways inadequate) play *Water!*, and Ambai's feminist short story "A Kitchen in a Corner of the House." I have chosen the works to demonstrate adequately both the variety of genres and the diversity of voices within contemporary Tamil literature, deliberately postponing engagement with other developments and movements in Tamil writing, which too are exemplary in this respect, until succeeding chapters. My recourse to these Tamil works is dictated by both my personal biography and the needs of my argument. Literature in Tamil falls among those "vernacular literatures" of India sweepingly dismissed by Rushdie (1997c, xv). Tamil is a modern South Indian language with a tradition of classical literature going back more than two thousand years. Certainly a language marked by a distinguished antiquity, it is also present in a variety of media from film and television to the Web. Nevertheless, as we shall see, because it is seen as a "vernacular language," its very modernity is implicitly questioned in Rushdie's arguments.⁵ My main interest in the section that follows is in demonstrating the *thematic* richness of postcolonial Tamil literature in order to suggest, in the final section of the chapter, the limitations of the present configuration of postcolonialism as a theoretical and critical project within the North American academy as well as aligned institutions elsewhere.

IS VERNACULAR LITERATURE TRACTOR ART?

In the introduction to the anthology he coedited, Rushdie asserts, "Parochialism is perhaps the main vice of the vernacular literatures" (1997c, xv). And in the interview, he elaborates further on what he means by this parochialism:

The besetting sin of the vernacular language is parochialism. It's as if the twentieth century hasn't arrived in many of these languages and the range of subjects and the manner of the treatment of them is depressingly familiar: village life is hard, women are badly treated and often commit suicide, landowners are corrupt, peasants are heroic and sometimes feckless, disillusioned and defeated. The language is a kind of Indian equivalent of what, in the Soviet Union, was called "Tractor Art." When the attempts are made to take notice of some of the developments in the rest of the world, the clumsiness is sometimes embarrassing. (1997b, 36)

For Rushdie, then, the parochial and backward nature of "vernacular literatures"—such as Tamil literature—is easily recognizable in their thematic poverty. But how true is this characterization of vernacular

literature? I begin an exploration of this question by turning first to K. N. Subramanyam's 1966 poem "Situation" because this poem would seem to offer the clearest and most direct refutation of Rushdie's claim.⁶

In a preface to a collection of Subramanyam's poems entitled *Puthu Kavithaikal (New Poems)*, the well-known Tamil poet Gnanakoothan notes, "The words and ideas of previous poets are recognizable in the poems of Ka Na Su from the beginning. But he has used these words and ideas in such a way that they have acquired new meaning" (1989, v).⁷ In poetry, as much as in his criticism and fiction, Ka Na Su (as K. N. Subramanyam was known) struggled with the different claims of innovative movements in literature and of tradition. As a poet, he belonged to the New Poetry movement heralded in 1962 by the influential anthology entitled *Puthukurralkal [New Voices]*, edited by Ci. Cu. Chellappa, in which, in fact, two of his poems were included. As Kamil Zvelebil notes in his essay in *The Smile of Murugan*, New Poetry shows a "radical break with the past and its traditions, though not a negation of the cultural heritage," an "experimentation with language and form of poetry, based on intellection," a familiarity with European and North American modernist poetry, and a "preoccupation" with very contemporary matters (1973, 313-14). Zvelebil concludes his positive assessment of New Poetry by noting the movement's "conscious attempts to evolve a new Tamil idiom, to write, uninhibitedly, about unconventional or even prohibitive themes, to get rid of fashionable foreign influences and to create a truly modern Tamil poetry" (335).⁸

Many of the features identified by Zvelebil in New Poetry are to be found in "Situation" (the translation is by the poet himself):

Introduced to
the Upanishads
by T. S. Eliot;
and to Tagore
by the early
Pound;
and to the Indian Tradition
by Max Mueller
(late of the Bhavan);
and to
Indian dance by
Bowers;
and to
Indian art
by what's-his-name;
and to the Tamil classics

by Danielou
 (or was it Pope?);
 neither flesh
 nor fish blood
 nor stone totem-pole;
 vociferous
 in thoughts
 not his own;
 eloquent in words
 not his own
 (“The age demanded . . .”)

Sanskritic (the Upanishads), national (Tagore), and Tamil traditions make up the cultural heritage of the person described in the poem.⁹ But ironically, his only access to these roots is through the work (“fashionable foreign influences”?) of Western cultural authorities like Eliot (Anglo-American), Müller (German), and Danielou (French). Thus the poem thematizes the contemporary cultural predicament of a certain segment of the *postcolonial* intelligentsia in Tamil India. Not of the land (“flesh”), not of the sea (“fish blood”), not a worthy (even if inanimate) emblem of his culture (“stone totem-pole”), filled with “words not his own”—the individual described in the poem is, it would seem, the product of what is often referred to in the postcolonial context as cultural imperialism.¹⁰

The oblique citation of Ezra Pound once again in the final line of the poem suggests the subtlety, erudition, self-reflection, and irony behind this meditation on the contemporary “situation” of the postcolonial intellectual. “The age demanded . . .” is a quotation from Pound’s “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (Contacts and Life),” a long 1920 poem that is, Peter Nicholls notes, “at times a distanced presentation of himself [Pound] and at others a satirical portrait of an ineffectual aesthete” (1995, 190). The phrase makes its appearance in the poem early in the first section, “E. P. Ode pour l’Election de Son Sepulchre,” which is a catalog of the various things “demanded” by the age: among other things, “mendacities” rather “than the classics in paraphrase” (Pound 1975, 98–99). Alluding to the just concluded First World War, Pound goes on to note, “There died a myriad, / And of the best, among them, / For an old bitch gone in the teeth, / For a botched civilization” (101). And still later in the poem, the phrase “the age demanded” reappears as the title of a section that continues Pound’s ironic and self-deprecating exploration of the relevance of (literary) tradition in the midst of

the terrible excesses of modern civilization. This section ends by noting “his final / Exclusion from the world of letters” (110).¹¹

“Better mendacities / Than the classics in paraphrase!” and “an old bitch gone in the teeth, / . . . a botched civilization.” Clearly these phrases find renewed significance by reference to the postcolonial Tamil intellectual at the center of Ka Na Su’s poem. If it is possible to read Pound’s poem as an ironic meditation on the modern Anglo-American poet’s relationship to tradition and classical literature, a similar preoccupation with regard to the modern Tamil intellectual is at the heart of Ka Na Su’s poem. As already noted, Ka Na Su was, like other poets of the New Poetry movement in general, deeply familiar with European modernism, whose central figures often find reference in his work. Of course, in his poem, Ka Na Su resituates this modernist preoccupation within a postcolonial context. Western modernity is not the same as postcolonialism, nor is the predicament of the modernist intellectual the same as that of the postcolonial intellectual. But in “Situation,” the example of the modernist intellectual is made to inform in a subtle way the predicament of the postcolonial intellectual. While what the postcolonial age (“botched civilization”?) demands is left somewhat undetermined at the end of Ka Na Su’s poem, the contemporary “situation” of a certain kind of postcolonial intellectual finds ironic figuration in the poem.

It seems clear to me that Ka Na Su’s “Situation” cannot be characterized, even by unsympathetic eyes, as Tractor Art.¹² Its themes even show a certain affinity with the concerns of that species of postcolonial criticism and theory that has been so important in assigning such a high value to the work of Rushdie. I have already cited a passage in which Keith Booker makes the link between this high valuation of Rushdie’s work and postcolonialism by noting that his “cultural hybridity is a crucial critical category” for postcolonial critics like Homi Bhabha. “Situation,” too, can easily be described as a hybrid text on a hybrid subject. Written originally in Tamil (in which language its irony is even more pointed), it was translated into English by the poet himself. The cultural hybridity of the poem, then, is not just a matter of citation; such hybridity inheres not just in the manner in which “Situation” incorporates Pound’s poem within itself but in its being, if one grants that the author’s translation of his own work has a different status from other translations, a bilingual poem. It exists in two languages at the same time. The “hybrid” subject of this bilingual poem is a mimic man. Homi Bhabha has written that in colonial discourse “mimicry

represents an *ironic* compromise” between “the synchronic panoptical vision of domination,” with its demand for “identity, stasis,” and “the diachrony of history,” with its demand for “change, difference” (1994, 85–86; italics in original).¹³ Thus mimic men and women are called forth by the ambivalence of colonial discourse, but Bhabha goes on to write that “the *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (88; italics in original).

In the economy of a *postcolonial* poem such as “Situation,” however, the ironic compromise represented by colonial mimicry and the notion that such mimicry is disruptive of the authority of colonial discourse are themselves ironized. The opposite of such irony and mimicry—a certain, if still vexed, notion of cultural autonomy—slips in through the back door: better is the practice of reading the Indian classics in their original languages. In Ka Na Su’s hybrid and ironic poem, despite—or, perhaps, through—a deep knowledge of Pound and Euro-American modernism, this desire for cultural autonomy articulates as well as performs an impatience with mimicry. While the poem acknowledges the “multicultural ‘syncretism’” and “the mobility and cross-overs of ideas and identities” that lie embedded in notions of colonial mimicry and that have been summarized variously as the most significant emphases of postcolonialism, at least in the North American academy, such desire reaches in other directions—toward notions of cultural autonomy. It is an autonomous access to his own culture that Ka Na Su recommends for the postcolonial intellectual at the center of his poem.

Through irony and mimicry, the poem attempts to snatch such autonomy from the very jaws of irony and out of the hands of inevitable mimicry. In this fashion, the postcolonialism of Ka Na Su’s Tamil poem now joins and now diverges from the influential strains of postcolonial theory under discussion here and Indian writing in English that is theoretically and critically abetted by it (such as Rushdie’s novels). And both when it joins and when it diverges it slips the noose of Tractor Art.

It may seem at first reading that Komal Swaminathan’s full-length play *Water!* cannot slip the noose quite so easily. The play, which I translated into English, is quite different in its main concerns, and indeed in its literary sensibility, from Ka Na Su’s poem.¹⁴ *Water!* is Swaminathan’s most important play and, arguably, the most important Tamil play of the twentieth century. It was enormously successful when first produced in 1980, partly because it was preceded and succeeded by

public furor. *Water!*'s controversial subject matter concerns a drought-stricken village in the far south of India. For five years the rains have failed in the fictional village of Athipatti, and the villagers have repeatedly petitioned the government, to no avail, for relief. Into this situation arrives the vagabond Vellaisamy, who exhorts the villagers to organize themselves and take various actions to better their condition. The villagers try to bring water in a cart; they boycott an election to put pressure on the government; they try to dig a canal to the village. Despite all their efforts, the villagers are defeated by the forces ranged against them. The play ends with the death of Vellaisamy, the dispersal of many of the key villagers, and the village still locked in drought.

Water! was written at the end of a decade of considerable social turmoil within India—ranging from Marxist-Leninist insurrection to Gandhian agitation. In the months immediately preceding the staging of *Water!*, signs of Marxist-Leninist activity had been reported in Tamil-speaking areas of India. Accordingly, censors in Madras attempted to deny permission to Swaminathan's play because of its alleged sympathy for the Marxist-Leninists. By the time the play was first staged, *Water!* had won considerable notoriety as a radical play. A year later it was made into an equally successful film, which encouraged many slum dwellers and villagers to take various actions to procure potable water. The play met with enormous enthusiasm from playgoers and with favorable reviews in the Tamil as well as English-language press. Many reviewers regarded the play as an important milestone in the history of modern Tamil drama.¹⁵ Though drama is, as M. Varadarajan notes, a neglected genre in Tamil literary criticism, it has had an especially intimate relationship to powerful political movements (1970, 269). Many significant political personages have also been important figures in the Tamil theatrical world.¹⁶ It is within this explicitly politicized but critically dismissed dramatic context that Swaminathan's achievement in *Water!* must be placed. The play represents, as indeed Swaminathan's preface to the published version of the play makes clear, a bold and self-conscious engagement with the aesthetic judgments and political conditions of the time.

The Tamil dramatic tradition, and the opportunities and limitations that it represents, constitute one aesthetic context for Swaminathan in *Water!*, but there are others equally important. Swaminathan himself has described his aesthetic sensibility as one informed by "a socialist realism" (in Narayanan n.d.). *Water!* is certainly a Marxist work. In an interview given in 1995, toward the end of his life, Swaminathan noted,

“Marxist literature and thought have provided me a broad-based philosophy of life and I have used it for literary ends” (qtd. in Santhanam 1995, 14). No doubt this “broad-based philosophy” suggests a markedly different aesthetic orientation from the New Poetry sensibility of Ka Na Su’s “Situation.”

Nevertheless, to present *Water!* as an example of Tractor Art would be to mischaracterize its real thematic and aesthetic complexity. Early in *Water!* the protagonist Vellaisamy reveals that he was born on the day of India’s independence: “My father used to say I was born when the flag of the white man came down over Delhi Red Fort and the tricolor went up. The white man was leaving this country. In his memory, my father gave me this name, Vellaisamy. Maybe it’s because I was born on the day of independence. . . . Like independent India, I too live the life of a dog” (Swaminathan 2001, 11). This strange passage full of postcolonial mimicry (Vellaisamy’s name can be translated to mean “white master”), ambivalence, and irony reveals Vellaisamy—like Saleem Sinai, the protagonist of Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* (1981)—to be a midnight’s child. “Initially seen as merely a comic, irreverent and high-spirited novel about a fantastic protagonist whose birth coincided with the independence of India,” Meenakshi Mukherjee notes, “*Midnight’s Children* was gradually appropriated into a theoretical discourse about nation, history and their narrativity” (1999, 9). And in his foreword to the published version of the play, Swaminathan writes, “The little village named Athipatti is the mirror-image of an India which has now been independent for thirty-two years” (2001, xxxii). Like *Midnight’s Children*, then, *Water!* (produced a year before the publication of the novel) is a detailed comment on postcolonial nationhood.

Rushdie’s fantastic imaginings, aspirations to a sweeping national allegory, and literary wordplay are aimed at a transnational readership; in contrast, Swaminathan’s mode of expression is resolutely attentive to the mundane forms of reality, his primary audience drawn from Tamil India, and his language firmly rooted in the specific dialect proper to the part of Tamil India in which the play is set. Even if both novel and play aspire to comment on the postcolonial condition of India, they do so in very different ways. *Midnight’s Children* sets out to be a grand historical novel, while *Water!* is content to explore the same postcolonial history of India through the effects it has had on one drought-stricken village. Perhaps this is the difference between that magic realism with which Rushdie’s work is often associated and what

I will call, appropriating for my purposes Rushdie's term of dismissal, a *vernacular* realism—that is, a realism *aspiring* to reproduce the local in all its specificity and drawing substantially, though not exclusively, on vernacular literary and theatrical traditions. Certainly, *vernacular* can carry connotations of being substandard or distinct from literary language. These connotations are evident in Rushdie's uses of the term. However, the term can also connote locality and particularity with regard to geographical region. I draw on the latter connotations in beginning here an elaboration of one of the main arguments of this book.¹⁷

I have sketched elsewhere Swaminathan's complicated relationship to psychological realism and socialist realism as aesthetic options in *Water!* (Shankar 2001a). *Water!* appears to be a naive play—Tractor Art—if assessed exclusively by the tenets of a psychological realism that emphasizes “rounded” and “interesting” characters and focuses on the motives of human behavior as we have come to understand them from the vast majority of contemporary Western bourgeois literature and drama. There is no real conflict among the “good” characters in the play—no unforgiving anger, no betrayal, no passionate love, no pettiness. Instead, there is a political complexity that is derived at least partly from Swaminathan's commitment to socialist realism. George Bizstray has suggested the following as important characteristics of socialist realism: a programmatic affirmation, a celebration of collectivism, an optimistic outlook, and an emphasis on the educative function (1978, 53–54). *Water!* both expresses and contravenes these tenets of socialist realism. Swaminathan's eschewal of a psychological realism—a realism based on certain notions of individual motivation—corresponds to a socialist realist collectivism. Also present in the play is an emphasis on the educative function. On the other hand, the tragic ending of the play, when Vellaisamy dies and the villagers are defeated in their attempt to bring water, contravenes the programmatic optimism of socialist realism. Assessed in the light of its engagement with socialist realism (both when affirming and when revising), *Water!* appears to be an aesthetically rich play.

Also contributing to this richness is a careful attention to vernacular detail that cannot be explained by reference to socialist realism. The play's language, which offers performative opportunities difficult to capture in a translation, is itself expressive of a vernacularism. With Tamil readers and audiences, the play is famous for its faithful evocation of dialectal variations of spoken Tamil—especially those prevalent

among the rural people depicted in the play. Vernacular cultural elements are also to be recognized in some of the characters. In contrast to a communist character such as Kovalu, typifying some of the heroic conventions of socialist realism, are characters like Adaikappan and Kandhaiyan, elderly villagers whose witty dialogue and bantering personalities can be traced back to folk theatrical forms such as *villupaattu* and *therukoothu*. The presence of numerous folk dances and songs in the play also suggests the great influence of these theatrical forms.¹⁸

In *Water!*, then, socialist realist elements coexist with aspects drawn from Tamil folk culture. I refer to Swaminathan's particular deployment of these latter elements in his play as vernacular realism. The socialist realism, derived from the transnational cultural politics of communism, coexists with the vernacular realism. If—of the three contemporary Tamil texts being discussed here—*Water!* seems in the greatest danger of falling into Rushdie's noose of Tractor Art, it is because of Swaminathan's compounding of a socialist realism with a vernacular realism whose thematic and aesthetic complexity cannot be fully appreciated and cannot even be understood until the text has been returned to its vernacular context. Raymond Williams has suggested that, in a certain productive critical tradition of understanding realism, reality is "seen not as static *appearance* but as the movement of psychological or social or physical forces; realism is then a conscious commitment to understanding and describing these. It then may or may not include realistic description or *representation* of particular features" (1976, 219; italics in original). The varieties of realism alluded to above—magical, psychological, socialist, and, finally, vernacular—should be understood in this light.

The point of my discussion thus far has been to suggest through successive layers of elaboration the inadequacy of characterizing as Tractor Art either an individual text such as *Water!* or a collective body of work such as contemporary Tamil literature. As we have seen, Rushdie mixes what he calls the parochialism of vernacular languages and a caricatured socialist realism in arriving at this questionable formulation. Through its careful and multilayered exploration of the experiences of women, "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House," by Ambai, provides further illustration of the unsuitability of Rushdie's characterizations of literature in languages other than English. While she is most renowned as a writer of short stories, one of Ambai's more interesting works is a volume of feminist literary criticism. *The Face behind*

the Mask is an account of the treatment of women in modern Tamil literature and is most valuable for its comprehensive approach to the subject.¹⁹ In the first part of the book, Ambai reviews a wide variety of literary works to examine how they portray women and arrives at a kind of critical taxonomy. The latter portion of the book is a compilation of the information she gathered from a number of important contemporary women writers through questionnaires and interviews. "The need," Ambai notes as she concludes her book, "is to experience the truth of one's self and one's society and find a genuine expression of it"; she goes on to suggest that "such an attempt to write the truth" would permit "the Tamil woman . . . to make common cause with many others who are in different categories of role-playing and not necessarily in the male-dominating-the-female order" (1984, 244).

In many ways, "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House," first published in 1988, exemplifies this supple and sedimented approach to feminism. The story is a study of three generations of Rajasthani women, as perceived by Minakshi (Mina), a Tamil woman married to Kishan, one of the sons of the family. The patriarch of the family is Papaji, the father of Kishan, and the arrangements of the house are firmly in his control. Ambai presents this household as experienced by Mina over a number of visits. Mina, like some of the other younger members of the family, lives elsewhere with her husband. The Tamil Mina is an outsider in this North Indian family, and the story is full of detailed attention to the vernacular specificity of the Rajasthani family and their difference from the Tamil Mina. When on one of her visits she proposes that the dingy kitchen around which the lives of the women of the family revolve be renovated and the view from its window cleared, she faces Papaji's opposition. "Papaji's silent retort" to Mina, Ambai tells us, is "Woman, woman of Mysore [a town in South India, close to the Tamil area]. . . . Dark skinned woman, you who refuse to cover your head, you who talk too much, you who have enticed my son . . ." (1992, 207).

In Papaji's shadow, his wife, Jiji, and stepmother, Bari-Jiji, compete for ascendancy over each other. Formerly, the ascendancy was Bari-Jiji's. But when she loses her husband and falls into the despised condition of widowhood, the positions are reversed. The keys of the household pass from Bari-Jiji to Jiji. Bari-Jiji is reduced to contesting Jiji's domination through subterfuge. Ambai's story ends with an episode in which Jiji falls sick on one of Mina's visits. As Mina watches over her mother-in-law in the "darkened room," a conversation takes place, though we are told "we cannot be certain whether this conversation

was actually started by her [Mina], or whether it happened on its own, or whether it only seemed to her to have occurred because she had imagined it so often" (221). Toward the end of this conversation that might not have been a conversation at all, Mina reflects that if all the "clutter" of managing the kitchen in the house "had not filled up the drawers of [Jiji's] mind," she too might have done great things (222). The story ends with Mina's (apparent) exhortation to Jiji to let go, to "sink deeper still," because "when you touch bottom you will reach the universal waters. . . . Your womb and your breasts will fall away from you. . . . And there will be you. Not trapped nor diminished by gender, but freed" (223).

It could be said that "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House," like the "feminist texts" from India reviewed by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan at the end of her book *Real and Imagined Women*, is full of what Sunder Rajan calls "discriminations . . . worth noting" (1993, 143). "Even as we grant that [the feminist texts] operate with a utopian bias," she observes, "we must recognize that they do not create utopian contexts that ignore the tensions of reality . . . ; while they mark what may be described as the brief truces that women seemingly wrest out of history, they do not offer them in the form of a resolution of the conflict between tradition and modernity . . . ; they do reproduce the dialectic of struggle, but not by representing women as unrelentingly external to the social process" (143). Such too are the discriminations of the cautiously utopian vision that concludes Ambai's story. In this sense, "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House" can be added to the feminist texts cited by Sunder Rajan "as significant political advances in the self-representation of women" (143). Furthermore, Ambai, in her desire "to make common cause with many others who are in different categories of role-playing," appends a number of other important themes to her central feminist concern. One of these themes—one I have already tried to indicate through my quotations from the story—is the place of the vernacular within the national community in the context of the historical cleavage of South India from North.

Ambai's story—like Rushdie's novel, Ka Na Su's poem, and Swaminathan's play—offers a wide-ranging comment on the postcolonial condition of India by focusing attention on both the state of women and the limitations of what Benedict Anderson has called the "imagined community" of the nation. In the story, the utopian vision of women's achievement of community *through* a liberation from the constraints of sex and gender is subtly juxtaposed to the sad reality of intranational

tensions. Mina's moment of communion with her mother-in-law at the end of the story is contrasted to Papaji's earlier dismissal of her as a "dark skinned woman" from Mysore. In this fashion, the story's conclusion is revealed to be a challenge not only to Papaji's patriarchal power but also to the power of an ethnic prejudice that threatens the utopian vision figured in the "imagined community" of Indian nationhood (an issue of great complexity to which I will have occasion to return in succeeding chapters). Thus Ambai's story reaches beyond the theme of oppression of women and becomes a feminist meditation under postcolonial conditions on the seductions of and obstacles to utopian desire, whether expressed in the notion of nationhood or other types of community.

It might seem that Ambai's vision of a genderless community into which women might escape is a naive notion that feminism has surpassed. But such an objection to Ambai's story would beg the following questions: Whose feminism? What is the address—in the sense of both locus and discursive purpose—of this feminism? It is precisely the universalization of the particular concerns of Western feminism as the concerns of women everywhere that Chandra Talpade Mohanty decried in her widely read essay "Under Western Eyes" (1988). In her critique of Western feminism, Mohanty objected not only to such universalization but also to the construction of the category of a universal Woman oblivious to the particular, material conditions in which particular, material women exist. As she notes in her follow-up essay "Under Western Eyes' Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles" (2002), such a critique does not make impossible the pursuit of other—more legitimate—forms of commonalities among women across the world. Perhaps Ambai's story and her vision of genderless community are deserving of critique—whether such critique is appropriate and what shape this critique might take is not the subject of this chapter—but the critique cannot characterize Ambai's story as backward, that is, insufficiently current, insufficiently developed, without opening itself to the charge of what Mohanty in "Under Western Eyes" calls "ethnocentric universalism" (1988, 199). In other words, Ambai's story cannot become Tractor Art without criticism running the risk of ethnocentric universalism. To make the point in this way is to turn the table on Rushdie's characterization of vernacular literature and suggest the "backwardness" of Rushdie's own charge.

Instead of backwardness, then, in "A Kitchen in the Corner of the House," we find a feminist meditation on utopian possibilities. Varieties

of community—of women, of citizens, of ethnic groups—busily lay claim to individual bodies through competing notions of solidarity. Against these notions, Ambai's conclusion brings her reader to the genderless and sexless “universal” community of humanity, a utopian conclusion—nowhere-yet-in-existence conclusion—possible only in the wake of the feminist exploration of the female body in the story. Of the body, Gayatri Spivak writes, “I take the extreme ecological view that the body as such has no possible outline. As body it is a repetition of nature. It is in the rupture with Nature when it is a signifier of immediacy for the staging of the self. . . . It is through the *significance* of my body and others' bodies that cultures become gendered, economic-political, selfed, substantive” (1993, 20; italics in original). Through her many references to menstruation, childbirth, and disease, Ambai draws repeated attention to the ineluctable materiality of the female body *in nature*. It is Ambai's feminism that allows her to delineate the ways in which the women characters (are made to) offer their bodies for the cultured staging of selves (theirs and others). If Ambai wishes—so tentatively, so circumspectly—to have Mina exhort her mother-in-law to disengage from the materiality of womb and breast, it is so that in the utopian freedom of “the universal waters” the ferocious signification of the female self in Papaji's patriarchal culture might be revealed and interrupted. Simultaneously, as we have seen, Papaji posits his and his family's Rajasthani-ness against Mina's Tamil-ness, thus bringing to the surface in the guise of ethnic subnational differences questions of vernacular specificity. The place of gender as well as the vernacular in postcolonial India stands indexed in these ways. Ambai's feminism evokes a utopian universalism in order to explore, among other issues, a specific gendered as well as vernacular postcolonial condition.

“Situation,” *Water!*, and “A Kitchen in the Corner of the House” are representative of three very different literary sensibilities within contemporary Tamil literature. These three texts cannot of course be said to describe contemporary Tamil literature exhaustively.²⁰ My choice of works is not meant to introduce contemporary Tamil literature, a task beyond the scope of this chapter, or indeed this book. It is meant rather to suggest the thematic diversity in contemporary Tamil literature: I have tried to indicate how the appellation Tractor Art is inadequate for any one of these three texts, even *Water!*, which no doubt is the kind of polemical text for which the label is intended. Instead of Tractor Art, we find in the “vernacular literature” represented by these three texts a highly nuanced presentation of a variety of postcolonial themes: the

challenge of cultural imperialism, the predicament of the postcolonial intellectual, the postcolonial fates of such transnational cultural movements as modernism and socialist realism, the impasses of postcolonial developmentalism, the place of women within the postcolonial nation, the limits of nationhood, utopian desire, bureaucratic indifference, and so on. My intention has been to expand the horizons of our aesthetic understanding through a series of illustrative readings meant to interrogate the nature of the vernacularity of Tamil literary texts and thus to draw attention to the varied nature of postcolonial experience.

The readings I have offered, I hope, lead us to question the critical attitudes at the foundation of Rushdie's judgment of the vernacular literatures of India, especially as he expresses them in his work as an editor of an anthology. In the preface to another anthology, the monumental *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, the editors Susie Tharu and K. Lalita present their rationale in selecting the works included in the following manner: "Not all the texts or authors . . . were chosen for the same reasons. We might have included one piece because it was moving, another because the writer was already well known, another precisely because she ought to be better known, or represented a class or other group whose creative activity is rarely taken into consideration in traditional literary histories and the canons they construct. Yet another might be raising an important issue, dramatizing a typical conflict, or representing a formal development" (1991, 1: xxiv).²¹ This perspective on the responsibilities of anthologizing offers a profound contrast to Rushdie's views in his introduction: where Tharu and Lalita put forward a highly nuanced grasp of the politics and economics of cultural production, Rushdie seems compelled to fetishize his particular notion of aesthetic value above all else. When read in conjunction with Vinay Dharwadker's observations in the introduction to a special issue of *World Literature Today* titled "Indian Literatures: In the Fifth Decade of Independence," the comments of Tharu and Lalita indicate clearly the limitations and biases of Rushdie's views. Dharwadker notes in his essay, "As a collective nationalistic enterprise that lasted more than a century, the literatures in the Indian languages [he means languages other than English] were able to legitimize themselves easily by claiming to possess the native, authentic, and traditional sources of Indian identity and culture" (1994, 240-41). "In the past ten or twenty years," he goes on to add, "that claim to authenticity has been undermined, not only by the accomplishments of Indian English literature, but also by the inescapable modernity and cosmopolitanism

of Indian-language writing itself, and by the emergent diaspora of the Indian languages among immigrant communities around the world” (241).

If the comments of Tharu and Lalita offer a contrast to Rushdie on the principles of anthologizing, Dharwadker's comments suggest a contrasting evaluation of Indian literatures. Rushdie's dismissive reference to vernacular literature as Tractor Art in what is, after all, only an interview would not, perhaps, be worthy of comment were it not, it is now clear, symptomatic of the logic behind the substantial critical and literary intervention represented by his anthology. Since, as Rushdie himself observes, only one writer who does not write in English is included in the anthology (1997c, x), we may then ask, why do Rushdie and his coeditor West not simply call their anthology a collection of postcolonial Indian writing *in English*? Why the desire to eschew what would seem a reasonable circumspection and to exalt Indian writing in English at the expense of the other Indian literatures? In the passage quoted at the beginning of this essay, Rushdie notes, “The *true* Indian literature of the first *postcolonial* half century has been made in the language the British left behind” (1997c, 50; italics added). It would seem that it is in support of this claim to the true India—and also its true postcolonialism—that Rushdie's remarkable comments on Indian literatures are marshaled in his introduction; for it is from these claims to India and its postcolonialism that the canonizing power of Rushdie's anthology flows. And—irony upon irony—in this pursuit Rushdie, spokesperson of the ironic and the hybrid, is forced to retreat to a language of authenticity!²²

POSTCOLONIALISMS: TRANSNATIONAL AND VERNACULAR

The effect of Rushdie's claims of authenticity for Indian writing in English is to make such writing the true literary child of Independence—the true literary inheritor of that postcolonial period inaugurated at the stroke of midnight, August 15, 1947. Ironically, as the epigraph that opens this chapter is meant to illustrate, Rushdie echoes Macaulay's infamous minute on education in advancing his observations. Reciprocally in his argument, and again like Macaulay, the very literatures that claimed to represent India authentically at the height of the nationalist movement are now declared to be inauthentic. In Rushdie's comments they are rendered, we might say, the orphans of midnight. The ghost

of Macaulay walks at Rushdie's postcolonial midnight hour. However, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, Rushdie's assessment of the vernacular literatures of India has been contested from a variety of directions. Within India, certainly, the vernacular literatures have sufficiently powerful institutional and popular support. Rushdie's orphaning of the vernacular literatures, I want to argue, can only be symptomatic of a postcolonialism—widely held within the North American academy and its adjuncts elsewhere—understood as a critical and theoretical enterprise privileging the transnational over the vernacular and capable of being contrasted in this respect to another species of postcolonialism.

In this time of the popularity of the postcolonial within the North American academy, much has been written of “the postcolonial condition”—even as many arguments have been made subjecting such a condition to skeptical scrutiny. Anne McClintock, for example, has questioned the accuracy of the term and expressed misgivings about it as “a singular, monolithic term,” while insisting that she would not “want to banish the term to some chilly, verbal Gulag; there seems no reason why it should not be used judiciously in appropriate circumstances” (1992, 294). Similarly, Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge have distinguished between “oppositional” postcolonialism and “complicit” postcolonialism and argued for what they call a “new postcolonialism.” “It is precisely if we acknowledge the pervasiveness but not universality of complicit forms of the postcolonial,” they conclude, “that we can trace the connections that go back to the settler experience and beyond, and forward to the new postcolonialism” (1991, 289). The essays by McClintock and by Mishra and Hodge, then, have challenged the rapidly institutionalizing definitions of such a term as *postcolonial* even as they have accepted the need for it.

In a similar spirit, I want to suggest that we refine our understanding of “the postcolonial condition” by making a distinction between a *transnational postcolonialism* and a *vernacular postcolonialism*. More often than not, postcolonial theory, especially but not exclusively within the North American academy, has characterized postcolonial societies as hybrid societies. Many of the signature themes of postcolonial criticism and theory have flowed directly out of this characterization of the postcolonial condition. Despite the emphasis on the “hybrid,” the ironic effect of this characterization has been, as Ania Loomba points out, to homogenize diverse postcolonial identities and practices under the rubric of a hybridity understood exclusively in the

context of a contest between (European) colonizer and (“native”) colonized (1998, 178).

The corollary of this emphasis on the hybrid is the erasure of certain other arenas of cultural endeavor, certain other sensibilities or ideologies. Thus influential forms of postcolonial criticism and theory have generally been suspicious of any robust idea of the local or the vernacular, when these terms mark hostility to the hybridizing force of transnational cultural flows. They have also been suspicious of ideas of “tradition” closely linked to the local and the vernacular, finding in appeals to such tradition only a distressing quest for purity and authenticity. It is in this context that we can understand Rushdie’s dismissal of the vernacular literatures of India as “parochial.” In this context too we might read Homi Bhabha’s essay “Minority Maneuvers and Unsettled Negotiations” (1997). This essay uses the term *vernacular* positively, but only by treating it as a rough synonym for *minority* and by separating it from *local*, *traditional*, and other such terms. Certainly, it is telling that after discussing “vernacular translations,” “vernacular cosmopolitans,” and the need “to transform social division into progressive minority agency,” Bhabha writes of “situations where the driving cataract of history, flowing relentlessly in the direction of the global, does not simply obliterate locality as a kind of obsolete irrelevance but reproduces its own compensatory projections of what tradition, the local, or the authentic *ought to have been*” (458; italics in original).

The main thrust of Bhabha’s argument is to establish the value of what he calls the “minority” perspective and an equivalence between it and “vernacular.” Reciprocally, however, “minority” becomes the wedge in his argument to separate “vernacular” from “tradition” and “the local,” and the latter two, when at all present, are reduced to “compensatory projections” of a globalizing history. And so here too the language of authenticity returns surreptitiously. Bhabha’s approach to the contradistinction of the global and the local, the transnational and the traditional, is altogether more careful than Rushdie’s dismissal of the vernacular as parochial. Nevertheless, the effect of his argument is to assign a position of inauthenticity to the local and the traditional a priori. The point of departure for analysis is the global, in whose context the local and the traditional, if present, must be understood. The opposite—any idea of the local and the traditional as a point of departure for understanding the global—remains unthinkable. But is not the notion that the driving cataract of history moves relentlessly in

the direction of the global a form of metanarrative needing careful elucidation? Such elucidation makes no appearance in Bhabha's essay, and so the discourse of the global validates itself without seeming to do so.

Riveted by the (proto)transnational and transnationalizing force of colonialism and its aftermath, such contemporary theories (commonly summarized as "postcolonial"), despite their complexity in many other respects, have presented a curiously impoverished idea of the appeal of the "traditional" as well as of the "local" and the "vernacular" (as distinct from Bhabha's "minority") on which such an appeal often founds itself. No doubt this is partly because discourses of the traditional in postcolonial societies have themselves often discounted the primacy of the colonial encounter in their arguments and thus have opened themselves to a variety of charges ranging from atavism to romanticized indigenism.

I hope, however, that my discussion of three contemporary works of Tamil literature sheds a different light on the varieties of vernacular culture and discourses of the traditional. I am *not* suggesting that the traditional and the vernacular somehow escape the colonial encounter, that they can be isolated from the category of the colonial. Neither "Situation" nor *Water!* treats the historical effects of colonialism with indifference. I am suggesting, however, that we should be able to argue that the perspectives of the vernacular and related ideas of the local and the traditional (with their orientation toward the autonomous) are no more worthy of automatic dismissal from theoretical discourse than are the perspectives of the transnational and related ideas of the diasporic and the modern (with their orientation toward the hybrid). Sometimes cultural autonomy is the explicit concern of vernacular literature (as in "Situation"). At other times, a subtle critical understanding of degrees of cultural autonomy within a historical "situation" enables a deeper appreciation of the context within which vernacular literature functions. Considered in this light, the notion of the vernacular can certainly be enabling in the journey toward new horizons of aesthetic understanding where postcolonial literature properly construed is concerned. At the same time, it is also possible, indeed necessary, to go beyond a narrowly literary context and propose that an adequate accounting of the postcolonial condition—an issue separate from the question of endorsement or repudiation of particular perspectives—requires a more careful attention to the claims of vernacular as well as transnational postcolonialism than has hitherto been granted within certain influential theories of the postcolonial.

The manner in which I have made the distinction in this chapter between varieties of postcolonialism no doubt finds it in linguistic difference—after all, *vernacular* is chiefly, though not exclusively, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* shows, a linguistic term—and I have no desire to disavow this foundation; but I do want to underscore the point that the distinction is ultimately about varieties of postcolonial *sensibility*, which have a strong relationship to linguistic differences but cannot be reduced to them. It is not as if we must all now rush out to learn the vernacular languages of the postcolonial world. It would be sufficient for the moment if we learned to become more attentive to the diversity of sensibility that actually exists there. Such attentiveness, when suggesting an orientation toward rootedness and cultural autonomy and specific locality, should be distinguished from parochialism (though such parochialism might very well be part of some varieties of vernacular sensibility). The distinction between language and sensibility is also the reason I have preferred to use *vernacular*, despite, as we have seen, its occasional dismissive associations, rather than *bhasha* in my discussions. Bonnie Zare and Nalini Iyer point out that the term *bhasha writing*, used by critics such as G. N. Devy (1992), refers to “texts written in Indian languages other than English” (2009, xii). *Bhasha* means language in many Indian tongues. To use it here would be to willfully emphasize language over sensibility. Additionally, such use would dilute the postcolonial force of my argument—that is, dilute the resonances of my argument for postcolonial locations other than India.

The nuances I am trying to draw attention to here may be elucidated by reference to the careers of Salman Rushdie and R. K. Narayan. The latter, those knowledgeable will agree, is at least as distinguished an Indian writer *in English* as the former. Yet his novels have remained in relative obscurity as far as postcolonial literary criticism as practiced within the North American academy is concerned. There are a variety of reasons for this obscurity, but a crucial one, I would say, is that Narayan is much closer to the pole of a vernacular postcolonial *sensibility*—that is, he shows a greater consciousness of the vernacular in both his subject matter and his philosophical perspectives—than to a transnational one. Accordingly, the transnational postcolonial perspectives under scrutiny in this chapter have been significantly less interested in Narayan—despite his aesthetic and philosophical complexity—than in Rushdie. In the next chapter, I engage in some detail with Narayan’s work, especially his most widely read novel, *The Guide*, to

illustrate with specific reference to discourses of caste my point regarding Narayan's complexity.

In the meantime, we might note that the corollary too is true. Works of vernacular literature can be located along a spectrum ranging from vernacular postcolonialism at one end to transnational postcolonialism at the other. Thus, among the three Tamil works discussed in this essay, Ka Na Su's "Situation" seems clearly closer to a transnational postcolonial sensibility than Swaminathan's *Water!* This judgment is based not simply on the thematic concerns of these works but also on their formal and aesthetic allegiances. Accordingly, the former lends itself much more readily to analysis using critical tools perfected on the terrain of transnational postcolonialism, though, as we have seen, even here there is a refusal to engage in the facile rejection of the notion of cultural autonomy. Ambai's short story (like *Water!*) is closer to the pole of a vernacular postcolonialism than Ka Na Su's poem in, if nothing else, its foregrounding of intranational—as opposed to transnational—social and political concerns. Even though I have suggested that the notions of transnational and vernacular postcolonialisms should not be reduced to language, as far as literary works are concerned the language used by a writer is of crucial importance in delimiting her audience. While not an inescapable straitjacket, language is a powerful constraining pressure in a variety of ways. Thus we should not be surprised to find that many more works of vernacular literature than literature written in English *tend* to one pole of the spectrum rather than the other.

Critics such as Neil Lazarus and Timothy Brennan have already offered persuasive and sharply delineated critiques of an unqualified privileging of what I am calling transnational postcolonialism. Thus Lazarus pertinently observes, "Even if, in the contemporary world-system the subjects whom Bhabha addresses under the labels of exile, migration, and diaspora, are vastly more numerous than at any time previously, they cannot reasonably be said to be paradigmatic or constitutive of 'postcoloniality' as such" (1999, 136–37). And Brennan's wide-ranging critique of the sensibilities of cosmopolitanism in *At Home in the World* connects at many points with the critique of transnational postcolonialism advanced here. For both Lazarus and Brennan, the vantage point that enables their critiques is the nation-state and what Brennan calls "left nationalisms" (1997, 317). "Nationalism is not dead," Brennan concludes his book. "And it is good that it is not" (317).

So it is. It is good, too, as Brennan himself would no doubt agree, that the vernacular is not dead. Brennan argues elsewhere in his book, “Lost in much of the writing on colonialism and postcolonialism is the mood of languorous attachments to native cultures, still in many ways premarket or anticapitalist, that were (in displacement) sites of nativity. If hybridity can be said to characterize them, then it is a hybridity reclaimed and reinvented as indigenous, defiantly posed against an increasingly insistent metropolitan norm” (10). In Brennan’s argument, a certain notion of the indigenous emerges as the counterpoint to the transnational. This recourse to indigeneity is echoed by Arif Dirlik, who notes, “Fundamental to any claim to indigenous identity is an assertion of an inalienable connection between community and land, and, by extension, between society and nature” (2003, 24).

I have preferred the term *vernacular* to do similar work because of my different objectives in this book. *Vernacular* conveys closer association with cultural themes and greater distance from themes of ethnicity and identity. One speaks of “indigenous peoples” but not of “vernacular peoples.” To my mind, *vernacular* is able to suggest a sense of local habitation based on genealogy (that *indigenous* indicates much more strongly) without becoming synonymous with it. My desire has been to find a term capable of drawing attention in a historically rich, critically supple, and conceptually broad way to commonly disregarded sensibilities, practices, and modes of being that operate as a counterpoint to the transnational in the postcolonial context. It is the impulse to mark the counterpoint sharply but not so sharply as to be usable only in limited circumstances that has led me to such a term as *vernacular*. The overlap between *indigenous* and *vernacular* indexes how each term expresses a “defiance” (Brennan’s apt characterization) of an uncritically transnationalist point of vantage in the postcolonial context. No doubt one term cannot always do the work of the other.

Criticism and theory, then—especially as often practiced within the North American academy, but this point is not necessarily relevant only to such a location—should distinguish between a transnational postcolonialism and a vernacular postcolonialism, without succumbing to the temptation to see the two as polar opposites permitting no gradations in between. This book is not meant to be an argument for the political or otherwise authentication of a vernacular postcolonialism over a transnational postcolonialism (or vice versa). I am aware that my argument proceeds mainly by reference to the Indian context

and that the specific nature of the relationship between vernacular and transnational postcolonialisms in India cannot be used to generalize facily about other parts of the world. I do believe, however, that the set of issues identified in this chapter and succeeding ones is germane to postcolonial criticism and theory in general. To different degrees and in different forms, the need for careful attention to both vernacular and transnational postcolonialisms is relevant to different parts of the postcolonial world. With regard to sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the debates over the appropriate language for literature—whether African literature should properly be written in languages like Yoruba and Swahili or may also be written in English and French—might be said to illustrate a similar tension between vernacular and transnational postcolonialisms.²³ I am aware, too, that I have staged my argument in this chapter on the terrain of literature, raising the possibility of misunderstanding. The textualism of my particular argument here should not be taken to indicate an exclusively textualist understanding of postcolonialism. I have been at pains to regard the literary works discussed as productive clues to certain aspects of the postcolonial situation.

In this chapter, my chief intention has been to outline, through readings of postcolonial literature, some of the pitfalls in current widely held—even near-pervasive—forms of critically assessing and theorizing the postcolonial within the North American academy and to recommend, as far as such criticism and theory are concerned, that we be attentive to both a vernacular and a transnational postcolonialism. We can begin being so only by learning to recognize, analyze, and evaluate a vernacular postcolonial sensibility in ways less reductive and dismissive than are currently the norm. In the pursuit of this goal, perhaps we will need to recover abandoned critical tools and terminology, perhaps to craft new ones. The relationship between Indian writing in English and vernacular literature, the place of the vernacular within the national imaginary, the relationship of the vernacular to caste and to notions of the human (especially in the context of representations of Dalits, the preferred term for those formerly referred to as untouchables), the careful distinctions to be made between vernacular and cosmopolitan sensibilities, the importance as well as challenges of translation as practice and as trope in the postcolonial context, the felicities and fallibilities of comparatism as a methodology capable of drawing into critical light hitherto ignored aspects of the postcolonial—it is at the threshold of these and other issues that we have now arrived. The

ensuing chapters will move beyond this threshold, for it is already clear where refusing to take the step across threatens to leave us. We would find ourselves abandoning, orphaning, entire shelves of postcolonial literature, and with, indeed, a far too narrow sense of the postcolonial. The refusal to step across would leave us still in the clutches of Macaulay's ghost.